

VZCZCXRO4872
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #1366/01 2611503
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 171503Z SEP 08
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3068
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2930
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3144
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001366

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, PM/FO
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S HOOK, WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR ABRAMS/YERGER/MCDERMOTT/RAMCHAND

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/15/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: JUMBLATT FORESEES PARALLEL TRACKS OF
RECONCILIATION AND VIOLENCE

REF: A. BEIRUT 1360
[B](#). BEIRUT 1358
[C](#). BEIRUT 1352

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) March 14 Druze leader Walid Jumblatt stressed that recent talks with Hizballah and rival Druze leader Talal Arslan were limited exclusively to security matters to defuse Shia/Druze tensions. Should majority leader Saad Hariri decide to meet with Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah, however, Jumblatt said that he would follow. He described the September 16 launch of the National Dialogue as calm, relaying, however, that many in the opposition continued to call for an expanded agenda and participation in an attempt to detract attention away from the central issue, Hizballah's arms. Jumblatt stressed the need for POTUS to warn President Sleiman in their September 25 meeting that continued U.S. assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) would be conditioned on having LAF leaders who are loyal to the state.
End summary.

SYRIANS BEHIND ARIDI ASSASSINATION
BUT NO ONE WILL SAY SO PUBLICLY

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief and Senior LES Political Advisor, met with Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) Druze leader Walid Jumblatt at his home in Clemenceau on September 17, one day after President Sleiman launched the National Dialogue and two days after PSP members met with members of Hizballah and rival Druze leader Talal Arslan in an attempt to calm tensions following the September 10 assassination of Arslan aide Saleh Aridi (reftels).

3. (C) Jumblatt said that Aridi (a member Arslan's pro-Syrian Lebanese Democratic Party) was once a PSP member and "friend of mine." For the first time, he pointed out, no one could openly accuse the Syrians of being behind the attack. Jumblatt speculated, however, that some people "around Arslan" might not be happy with recent Druze reconciliation efforts, tossing out the names of Druze arch-rival Wiam Wihab and Syrian Socialist National Party leader Assad Hardan, whom he labeled Syrian "mercenaries." Jumblatt confirmed that the

GOL did not plan to refer the case to the UN, although there were similarities between Aridi's assassination and other attacks.

TALKS WITH HIZBALLAH
LIMITED TO SECURITY

¶4. (C) Jumblatt said he would not accuse Syria publicly because his priority was to defuse Shia/Druze tensions in Beirut and the mountains and he needed Arslan's support. Reconciliation was also in Arslan's political interest and was improving his rival's image, he noted, adding that he did not mind, since it was good for the Druze. Jumblatt expressed surprise that PSP Minister Ghazi Aridi -- a distant cousin of Saleh -- opted not to attend the September 15 reconciliation meeting of members of his own PSP with Arslan and Hizballah officials (Ref B).

¶5. (C) Jumblatt stressed that the reconciliation talks were limited to security issues. He added, however, "If Saad (Hariri) decides to see Nasrallah, I will follow," but stressed that he would not pursue this path on his own. "I would be seen as a traitor," he explained, "especially by the Sunnis, whose hatred of the Shia in some areas is unbelievable" (after the May 2008 violence). Former PM Rafiq Hariri's meetings with Hizballah had occurred in a different context, he added, explaining that Hariri preferred to meet with the "trustworthy" Nasrallah rather than Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, whom he reportedly called "a big liar."

BEIRUT 00001366 002 OF 003

¶6. (C) Jumblatt said his March 14 partners were informed in advance of the reconciliation meeting and "understood." (Note: March 14 Secretariat members told Pol/Econ Chief in a subsequent meeting that Jumblatt had "informed" but not "consulted" them on the PSP's intentions to participate in the meeting. End note.)

NATIONAL DIALOGUE:
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

¶7. (C) Jumblatt said the mood in the September 16 launch of the National Dialogue was calm. Even Hizballah MP Mohamad Raad, normally a "tough guy," agreed that the main issue was the defense strategy, he said, adding that this was probably at the assistance of President Sleiman. Kataeb leader and former President Amine Gemayel and Orthodox leader Michel Murr reportedly wanted the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to tackle the defense strategy as a "technical issue," but Hariri objected. Jumblatt reported that Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aun, citing his 2006 Memorandum of Understanding with Hizballah, attempted to argue that the resistance should be separate from the state, since the state was incapable of defending the country against Israel. March 14 objected, he said, insisting that one day Hizballah's arms must be incorporated into the army.

¶8. (C) Aoun, along with opposition Zahle bloc representative Elie Skaff, also attempted to include constitutional reforms and the role of the Council for Development and Reconstruction on the agenda, Jumblatt added, agreeing with the Ambassador that the opposition was trying to throw in everything but the kitchen sink in an obvious effort to thwart the proceedings. Jumblatt also agreed that the opposition's calls to enlarge the participants list was another attempt to undermine the Dialogue, and was aimed primarily at securing a seat at the table for Marada leader Suleiman Franjeh.

¶9. (C) Noting that he had hosted the Qatari Emir's cousin Jabel bin Youssef at his Chouf home in Mukhtara the weekend before (bin Youssef departed Lebanon on September 14, two days prior to the Dialogue's launch), Jumblatt said the

Qataris currently were keeping a low profile. Despite SYG Amr Moussa's presence, the Arab League did not play a substantive role in the September 16 meeting, he added.

¶10. (C) Commenting on the November 5 date for the next session, Jumblatt said it was "as if nobody is in a hurry," despite the continuing violence on the ground. Sleiman reportedly cited a busy travel schedule in October as the reason for the delay. Jumblatt said he expected more violence in the run-up to the spring 2009 parliamentary elections, predicting "parallel tracks of assassinations and reconciliation."

QUADRIPARTITE DEJA VU?

¶11. (C) Jumblatt downplayed the impromptu meeting between President Sleiman, Speaker Berri, Jumblatt, Hariri, and Raad that occurred in Sleiman's office immediately prior to the National Dialogue (delaying it by 30 minutes). Berri reportedly requested the meeting and objected to suggestions that PM Siniora join. Afterward, Hariri shook hands with an obviously frustrated Siniora left waiting outside. Jumblatt believed Berri was trying to pave the way for a future meeting between Hariri and Nasrallah.

WHAT SLEIMAN NEEDS TO HEAR FROM POTUS

¶12. (C) Accusing Hizballah of conducting a "calculated infiltration" into Lebanon's military apparatus, Jumblatt stressed that President Bush should stress to Sleiman in their September 25 meeting that U.S. assistance to the LAF was conditioned on appointing LAF leaders who were loyal to the Lebanese state. Sleiman was a "decent guy," Jumblatt added, but a weak personality surrounded by pro-Syrians.

BEIRUT 00001366 003 OF 003

Jumblatt did not believe Sleiman would form his own political bloc. (Note: Many senior LAF positions are expected to turn over in upcoming weeks based on the Lebanese military tradition of officers from senior year groups retiring when a new commander is appointed. LAF Commander General Jean Kahwagi, who replaced Sleiman as commander, is already moving to replace these old guard officers with officers that are loyal to the army, but he is already encountering resistance from the Shia community which wants to pick the Shia officers for the army. Sleiman should weigh in now to help the Army Commander appoint officers of all confessions who are loyal to the Army and not to political parties. End note.)

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Many of our March 14 contacts recently have commented on Jumblatt's troubled state of mind that has persisted since the May 7 takeover by Hizballah, some even suggesting that he is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. While Jumblatt appeared in better spirits in this meeting than, for example, following his fall 2007 visit to the U.S., when he failed in his mission to convince the USG to opt for regime change rather than behavioral change in Syria, it is clear the violence against the Druze is weighing on him. Being the Druze feudal leader and realpolitik thinker he is, it is not surprising that Jumblatt is pursuing a security dialogue with Hizballah to protect his constituency, especially when he knows he cannot rely on his Sunni and Christian partners for protection of the much smaller Druze community.

¶14. (C) We do not see this security dialogue morphing into a political alliance at this juncture. However, Jumblatt's acknowledgment that "he will follow Saad" suggests that, should the political winds change and Hariri take this route, Jumblatt will not be far behind. Many here predict that a Hariri-Nasrallah meeting is inevitable, albeit not before Hizballah assumes responsibility for the May violence that

resulted in the deaths of dozens of Sunnis. Although the brief meeting with President Sleiman immediate before the National Dialogue may have painted a different picture, we do not expect a reemergence of the 2005 Hizballah-Berri-Hariri-Jumblatt quadripartite alliance. We will continue to keep a close eye on the shifting kaleidoscope of political alliances in the run-up to the spring 2009 elections. End comment.
SISON